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ABSTRACT

To investigate the temporally ordered process in image and issue learning as it affects the voting decision, a study conducted a secondary analysis of panel survey data from Wisconsin during the 1976 presidential elections. The study hypothesized that, because of the difficulty in understanding complex issues, voters rely on image evaluations for initial candidate preference--issue positions are then learned to support the image-based choice. The survey consisted of random telephone interviews: the first set of interviews was completed shortly before the first presidential debates between incumbent Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter; those who agreed to be reinterviewed were called again between the first and second debates. The third interviews occurred after the four debates but before the election; and final interviews followed the election. A total of 164 respondents continued throughout the interviews. Measurements included vote intention, candidates' personal image, respondents' position on four political issues, ideological differences, and party identification and leaning. Precommitted or "one-issue" voters were eliminated, leaving 123 respondents for analysis. Causal analysis revealed that for Carter, images at an initial time period determined later candidate preference and issue learning. Also, image evaluations for Carter occurred at the beginning of the decision-making process. For Ford, however, images did not predict later issue learning and candidate preference--initial issues were the predictor. Also for Ford, vote intention played a significant role in later issue learning. (Four tables of data, 4 figures, and 49 references are appended.) (MM)

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ABSTRACT of paper submitted to the Communication Theory and Methodology Division of AEJMC

Title: Looking at Voting as a Decisional Process: What Factors Determine Initial Preference?

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This study tested the proposition that due to the difficulty in understanding complex issues in a presidential campaign, and where there are no precommitments to influence the vote decision based on pre-campaign determinations, the voter relies on image evaluations for initial candidate preference. Issue positions are then learned to support the image-based choice.

Path analyses conducted on data from the 1976 presidential election supported our expectations in the case of Carter, but not in the case of Ford.

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Looking at Voting as a Decisional Process: What Factors Determine Initial Preference?

by

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Paper submitted to the student section of the American Educators in Journalism Conference, 1988 in Portland Oregon.

A great deal of research has been conducted by political scientists and mass communication researchers in the concerted effort to understand political campaigns in the United States. As party identification since 1950 has steadily declined in its power to predict the vote (Nie, Verba and Petrocik, 1984), researchers have had to part with the relative theoretical comfort that concepts such as "activation" and "selective exposure" (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1944) afforded in explaining voting behavior.

Research during the 1960's and thereafter, began to explore in greater depth the influences of issues and images, in addition to party identification, on the voting decision. The trilogy of party affiliation, issue proximity, and image evaluation as the primary determinants of the vote decision has since been established in the research literature (Markus and Converse, 1984).

In twenty-five years of scholarship, a wealth of factors has been identified as playing a role in voting decisions of the electorate. Those of interest to us include the findings that party affiliation is still the best predictor of the eventual vote (Sears and Chaffee, 1976), that recently, images have predicted the vote better than issues (Dennis, Chaffee and Choe, 1979; Whitney and Goldman, 1980), that images play an important role even in the decisions of highly educated people (Glass, 1984), as well as for the more television reliant (McLeod, Glynn and McDonald, 1983), that issues can be divided into "easy" and "hard" depending upon a number of

factors (Carmines and Stimson, 1984), that there are differences depending upon time of decision to vote (Chaffee and Choe, 1980), and that there are differences in all the previous factors depending upon whether the election is congressional or presidential in nature (Ranney, 1983; Mann and Wolfinger, 1984).

The evidence mentioned above forms part of a large body of literature on election campaigns. From 1960 to 1976 and beyond, the phenomenon of presidential debates has added further to our knowledge through debate related events such as: polarization of partisan voters (Sears and Freedman, 1979), most use of debates to discover candidate issue postions, but most information gain from image evaluations (McLeod, Bybee and Durall, 1981; McLeod, Durall, Ziemke and Bybee, 1979), and most use of debates for campaign deciders (Chaffee and Choe, 1980).

Models do exist (Baker, Dalton and Hildebrandt, 1984; Markus and Converse, 1984; Page and Jones, 1984) that bring together in differing configurations party, issue, image and other items, but they often do not account for temporal ordering; or they try to explain so much to increase the R^2 that they lose intelligibility.

It is our purpose to investigate a plausible explanation of the voting decision, one that addresses the process in a relative *temporal* order.

The question addressed in a large sense is, how do most voters learn images and issue stands and decide who to vote

for?

At the heart of our interest is a strong skepticism about issue voting, though this in itself is nothing new (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, 1960). Issues in a national presidential election campaign are necessarily complex, since they deal with enduring national or international problems. Complex issues, moreover, usually entail equally complex consequences, which in turn are conditional upon a host of other matters. Reducing unemployment or the deficit, for example, are extremely complicated and difficult tasks involving a great many other related factors such as the prime lending rate, foreign tariffs, the GNP, taxes, and so on. When such matters become campaign issues, both candidates will profess a desire to fix the problem, and each will present a differing plan for doing so. We would expect that for most of the electorate, given that most people are not economists, it would constitute an impossible task to decide, on the merit of the issue, which candidate has presented the best plan. It is this relatively straightforward argument that forms the basis for our skepticism as regards issue voting: given the very complex and abstract nature of national election issues, we find it doubtful that candidate preferences are determined to any important extent because of agreement on issue positions between voter and candidate. How can one agree when one does not understand? This is not the same concept as "hard" issues, which are usually defined as those requiring mental calculus to decide the option that is in one's interest (Nie, Verba and

Petrocik, 1984). In our conception, most national election issues are unintelligible in their entirety, and even if bits and pieces of a certain issue can be understood, the whole issue with its enormous collection of consequences cannot be. Though we do not ignore any possibly simplistic, or incomplete understanding of the issue itself, we maintain however, that that is not an important aspect of a voter's decision process. Faced with an issue such as the deficit with its competing proposals for reduction, we expect the voter to realize his/her incomplete understanding of the matter. Faced thus with the inevitable impasse in deciding based on issues, other factors must play a role in the process. Among these latter determinants would be party affiliation, ideological leaning (liberal - conservative) and image perceptions.

Strong party affiliation and ideology are usually long standing commitments and are thus not campaign-determined, especially so for repeat as opposed to first-time voters. In this strict or extreme determination, party and ideology do not form part of the campaign process, but rather stand outside of it as exogenous variables, being determined in advance of the campaign. A Republican will tend to vote for the Republican candidate no matter what the particular issues or images, and a liberal will tend to vote for a clearly liberal candidate. The study of these *predispositions* is not our intent and we will consequently not deal with voters whose decisions are based on pre-commitments, whether they are party related or ideological in nature.

The voters whose decision process we are most interested in are those that meet national elections with no clear commitments, and are thus in need of making an eventual choice based on campaign-specific information. As this information consists primarily of issues and images, and as most issues are arguably unintelligible, what remains of most use as information helpful in the decision process according to our conception, is image information. Impressions, influences, likes and dislikes are fairly personal in nature; they are affective responses that need no greater learning or knowledge to be experienced. We thus expect that a relatively quick impression of a candidate is made based upon image characteristics such as speaking ability, honest looks, presidential demeanor, intelligence, charm, etc. Affective response based upon such image characteristics can be gleaned with relatively little exposure and effort. Candidate preference based on image attributes, therefore, seems to us a probable first step in the decision process.

Issue learning, however, is a documented process in many studies and so must be further accounted for. Here, we make a crucial distinction between issue learning and issue understanding. The latter we believe as improbable for most issues for most people. But issue learning can refer to a learning of what each candidate supports or stands for, without a necessary understanding of that position based upon the issues that form it. All that is needed is a learning of relative differences in emphasis between candidates, and not

exact "positions." We believe that this learning of candidate issue positions is the next step in the decision process. In effect, we propose that once image commitments are determined, the issue positions of the preferred candidate are learned. But we note again that the crux of the decision falls necessarily on image perceptions.

The process we propose can be modeled by the temporally ordered attitude-knowledge-behavior cognitive structure, where because of the relative unintelligibility of national election issues, images play a major role in the voting decision process for those with no recourse to prior commitments. Once attitudes are formed, knowledge is gained and the behavior, voting, follows in due time.

A great deal of the evidence cited previously is indirectly supportive of our position. These include the large number of studies where image perceptions predict the vote better than issue proximity does, suggesting the possibility of an initial, important image determination; those where there exist large inaccuracies in preferred candidate issue stands, suggesting difficulty in issue understanding; those where greater expectations exist of issue understanding from debates, but where eventually image perceptions provide more satisfaction, suggesting the relatively greater facility for affective determination.

While none of these findings provide outright evidence for our approach, they do hint at the possibility of the existence of a process as we propose.

Propositions centrally connected to our proposal are:

1. There generally exists a strict temporal ordering of information gain and decision making concerning candidates. Most often, image characteristics will be *first* noticed, a tentative candidate preference will be made based on that information, and *then* issue differences will be learned.

2. Most election issues will not be fully understood as a result of their inherent complexity, though certain limited aspects of an issue may be.

To these ends, debates may be seen as the most suitable opportunity for the study of a temporal order in the vote process. Since evidence exists that voters withhold decision making with the expectation that the debates will provide a great deal of issue and image information (McLeod, Bybee and Durall, 1981), a testing instrument may be constructed to collect information on temporally ordered knowledge gain and decision making. This would be a relatively direct test of the process we propose. Another method would be the probing with open ended questions to reveal the extent of understanding, not only of learning, but also of election issues.

Though we expect the general process delineated above, situational factors may affect the process to varying degrees. Peer pressures, spiral of silence, time of decision, and weak partisan ties are among many factors whose effects on the process here outlined need to be elaborated in further research. What we maintain to be important in this confluence of possibilities is the starting point of assumptions that

guide research directions.

A final consideration important for our investigation concerns individuals who, although not understanding the issues in the campaign, nevertheless do not make decisions based on image or partisan ties. For certain voters, there may exist one or maybe two particular issues they consider absolutely crucial, and thus choose their candidate based on an issue of great personal importance. We do not expect many such "one-issue voters," (or actually more than "one-issue" voters!) and that is why we still assert the general applicability of our hypothesis for most people. These "one-issue voters" are the closest to "issue voters," i.e. those using some "mental calculus" for their choice.

This study, then, will be an attempt to examine a temporally ordered process in image and issue learning. This aspect of our study corresponds to a test of our first proposition, that image preferences based on image characteristics are what get decided initially and are what consequently determine issue learning of the preferred candidate.

Proposition two which claims that most election issues cannot be fully understood cannot be tested here. It is an important and explicit assumption underlying all our propositions, but its test will not be directly measured.

SAMPLE

Our research design consists of secondary analysis of panel

survey data from the state of Wisconsin during the 1976 presidential elections (Dennis, Chaffee and Choe, 1979). The reason the 1976 elections were studied was because that election campaign was the closest in nature to the 1988 one. In 1976, Jimmy Carter was the newcomer Democrat with no presidential experience, a situation which will be precisely repeated in 1988, whoever the Democrats nominate as their presidential candidate. Carter also needed to get his views and image better known, a process all Democratic primary candidates now have to go through. Also in 1976, Gerald Ford had been vice president, and president for a short time, and was the Republican nominee for president. His views and image were somewhat familiar although not very clear. That situation is, this year, approximated by George Bush, who has served as vice president, and seems to want to create an image and make his issue positions known. So if the results of this study are worth further investigation, this presidential year should provide an ideal setting for it.

Telephone interviewing, then, with sampling based on area codes, prefixes, and four random digits, was used throughout the study. The first wave was completed just before the first debates (T_1: Sept. 17-23). Those who agreed to be reinterviewed were called again between the first and second debates (T_2: Sept. 24-Oct. 6). The third wave followed the completion of the four debates but was before the election (T_3: Oct. 23-Nov. 1). And the final wave came after the

election (T_4: Nov. 3-29). A total of 164 respondents continued throughout the four waves.

The reason debates were chosen to be studied, was, as mentioned above, because people's anticipation of the debates may have encouraged them to withhold their decision until the debates, which would results in a more valid cause-effect assumption for those who thus rely on the debates for decisions. In addition, panel surveys of the debates provide a determinate temporal order to examine. 1976 was also an "issue-oriented" election (Dennis, Chaffee and Choe, 1979) such that our chances of finding evidence of the counter-hypothesis of more issue voting are maximized.

Although 164 respondents may be too few, the Wisconsin sample was nevertheless representative, predicting within 2 percent the actual Wisconsin vote, and close demographically to national samples of Gallup and others. We thus consider the 1976 elections well suited for our study.

MEASURES

The items of interest in the survey were measured in the following manner. Vote Intention was measured on a reduced 2-point scale in the T_1-T_3 waves, where a score of "1" signified intent to vote for Ford, and a score of "2" pointed to an intent to vote for Carter. Personal Image questions were measured on 5-point scales, with the following items asked of each candidate in each wave: honesty and integrity, strength and decisiveness, friendliness and pleasantness, capacity for effective leadership of the government, clarity on the issues and ability to inspire confidence as a speaker. On each item, a score of "5" is the most positive rating, while a score of "1" is the least positive. A typical phrasing of an image question:

> How do you rate the candidates in their ability to inspire confidence by the way they speak. How does Carter rate on the way he speaks ?

Five-point scales were also used to measure respondents' own position and the positions ascribed to Ford and Carter on each of four issues: Unemployment, Tax Reform, Abortion, and Defense Spending. A typical phrasing of an issue question is:

> Let's take the issue of government spending for defense and the military. If '1' means increasing the level of spending for defense a good deal and '5' means substantially reducing how much we spend for defense, where would you place yourself ?

Each issue item was scored such that a score of "1" corresponded most closely to the Republican party platform,

while a score of "5" would be closest to the Democratic party platform.

Ideological differences were calculated in the same way using a 5-point "liberal-conservative" scale.

Party identification was measured on a 5-point continuum, with "independent" in the middle, "strong" Democrats and Republicans at the extremes, and "weak" identifiers and "leaning" independents grouped together at the intermediate points.

Party Leaning, finally, was measured on a reduced 2-point scale where a score of "1" signified leaning most towards the Republican party, while a "2" meant leaning most towards the Democratic party.

Finally, we used mean substitution for our missing data due to its conservative nature, and because we could ill-afford to lose respondents.

METHODS

As mentioned above, we are primarily interested in the decisional processes of uncommitted voters and the effect of image and issue information on that process. Because precommitments, in this sense, might severely influence voting decisions regardless of image or issue information present in a specific campaign, we first pulled out of our sample those voters who had ideological or party commitments. In addition, and for the same reasons, we deleted from our sample those

individuals deemed to be "one-issue voters."

To take out those ideologically precommitted, we recoded items by multiplying by 100 one's own liberal-conservative position, and by 10 the position on the liberal-conservative scale assigned to Ford. We then added those two items to the position assigned to Carter, and extracted from the new scale extreme scores and coded them "1." By doing this at each time point, we created a new measure where a "1" signified individuals who saw themselves as very liberal or very conservative and who saw the corresponding candidate, Carter or Ford, as very liberal or very conservative. For an individual to be deleted from our sample because of ideological precommitment, that individual would have had to have scored a "1" on this new scale, and would have had to have maintained that extreme position from T_1 to T_3. In this manner, we excluded a total of seven individuals.

We used a similar procedure for determining Party precommitment. The variables used here were strength of party identification and vote intention. The extremes coded as "1" here signify those who have strong party identification, and intend to and eventually do vote for the candidate closest to their party (Ford as Republican, Carter as Democrat). Those individuals pulled out of our sample because of party precommitment would have had to score a "1" on the new scale, and stay at that extreme position from T_1 to T_3. This procedure excluded thirteen cases.

"One-issue voters," being the closest to a "rational voter"

idea, were taken out because of their precommitment on a specific issue. The first criterion for these voters was that they have an extreme own position on any issue at T_1 and maintain that same extreme position to T_3. since "one-issue voters" need to vote for a candidate, they must by T_3 at the latest have learned candidate positions. Consequently, the second criterion was for them to discern a difference other than a "Neutral" or "Don't Know" between the candidates on the particular issue at T_3. Finally, they had to vote for the candidate perceived to be closest to the T_1 to T_3 extreme position. If an individual met all these criteria, then s/he was classified as a "one-issue voter" and pulled out of our sample. In this way, a total of twenty-one individuals were selected out. Looking separately at each issue, 2 were precommitted on Unemployment, 7 on Taxes, 11 on Abortion, and 1 on Defense. The fact that more people were precommitted on abortion than on all the other issues combined, follows from our theoretical expectations for "easy" issues.

These three categories of precommitted voters have made their vote decision previous to the campaign, such that image and issue information that surface during the election and debates did not serve to change their initial position. The remaining voters, however, will be dependent upon such information for their vote decision, and this is the process we want to test according to our hypothesis. Admittedly, we would have met with great disappointment and strong disconfirmation of our assumptions had we in this manner taken

out too many voters. In fact, our expectation was that very few would have been "one-issue voters" in the classic rational voter mold. At this initial juncture, our assumptions held, and from our sample of 164 individuals we pulled out 41 voters that met our criteria for precommitment.

For the remainder of our analysis, including the information in all the tables and figures, we deal only with the remaining 123 individuals who have little political precommitments.

At this point we will bring in the variables that we previously theorized would be involved in the decisional process of the voter. In Table 1, we present the means and standard deviations for each of the items that will make up the Issue and Image indices in our later analyses.

It seems from Table 1 that most of the items we are dealing with are relatively unchanging. The means vary little from T_1 to T_3, as do the standard deviations. This is on the face of it somewhat discouraging to us. We did expect high and unchanging Image evaluations since we theorized that image attributes are quickly ascertained and do not require intellectual debate. But we had hoped for greater variance between issue position evaluations. Specifically, since we theorized T_1 Image evaluation to determine later issue learning, we expected T_3 issue item variances to be smaller than T_1 variances. One plausible explanation of this would be the possibly arbitrary nature of T_1 as "before the first debates." The process we wish to examine may have been

determined at some time before the study's T_1, causing us to miss the initial relative "confusion" concerning issue positions. Even so, it is interesting to note that in most cases, Self position on issues has a larger standard deviation than candidate positions. Though not significant, this difference may point to the difficulty we theorize is inherent in issue understanding. In the same vein, while it seems that most Self positions are closer to Carter's position, aggregate vote intent is completely undecided, possibly hinting again at the difficulty in deciding based on issues.

We next constructed indices to use in later multivariate analyses. Since we theorized a temporally ordered process with differing Image and Issue effects at different times, we had to construct separate indices for each time point. We constructed six sets of indices all together, three Image indices and three Issue ones for T_1, T_2, and T_3. For the Image indices, we grouped together at each time point all six Image items in an additive manner. This combines the items Honesty, Strength, Friendliness, Leadership, Clarity and Speaking Ability into an index of Image evaluation. We followed this procedure separately for Ford and for Carter, at each time point.

We also constructed Issue indices to be used in our multivariate analyses. For the Issue items, we followed closely the procedures used by Dennis and Chaffee in 1976 on the same data. We created a measure of "relative distance from self," a common measure in political science (Beardsley,

1973). We followed our procedure for the Issue items separately for each candidate, at each time point. To create a distance-from-self measure, we substracted Own position on an issue from the position ascribed to each candidate separately, discarded the signs, and added all Issue items together at each time interval. We thus created three Issue indices for each candidate, at each time point using the candidate's perceived position as a deviation from one's own position. The smaller the score is on the Issue index, the closer you are to the candidate's position.

Table 2 shows Cronbach's Alpha, or reliability scores for each index created. The Image indices have very high reliability scores which increase over time, indicating possibly that all Image items can be seen as a single dimension in one's thoughts about a candidate. This supports our notion of quickly ascertained, and relatively unchanging image evaluations of candidates from brief initial exposure. Reliability scores for the Issue items, on the other hand, are not nearly as high, and at T_2 Carter's Issue index can even be deemed unreliable. Not having as many items in the Issue indices as there were in the Image ones may be a contributing factor to the lower scores. But it is also plausible that since no one Issue item is varying wildly in Table 1, the Issue items do not form part of a constant dimension of thought in one's mind. It may be that over time, given our assumption of difficulty in understanding issues and their consequences, individuals review many differing aspects of an

issue in an effort to come to grips with it. At differing time points, we may in fact not be measuring the same thing. Nonetheless, issue reliabilities do usually increase over time, and are generally acceptable. It does seem that over time, as issue positions of candidates are learned, the issue indices may be measuring more consistent conceptualizations. This possibility is especially interesting as it regards Carter's issue index. The fact that his T_3 reliability is much higher than his T_1 or T_2 reliabilities may indicate an eventually clearer understanding of an unknown candidate's position.

Having determined reliability measures at each time point for each index by Cronbach's Alpha, we felt it important to also review reliability and stability measures across time. For this we refer to the method devised by Heise (Heise, 1969). We should note here that since we had no reason to doubt that the determination of the index by the underlying variable and the rate of instability of the underlying variable were constant over time, we felt that we had fulfilled the assumptions underlying Heise's method and thus did not use the method devised by Wiley and Wiley (Wiley and Wiley, 1970). Table 3 shows the reliability and stability scores for each index across time. It is apparent that both issue and image index reliabilities for either candidate are high across time, suggesting that for our time period, we are measuring similar conceptualizations within each index. Given this, it is encouraging to us that stabilities behave close to

what we would have expected. Images are highly stable for both candidates denoting the unchanging nature of evaluations of candidate images. For Carter image, S_{12} is .97 and S_{23} is .93, while for Ford S_{12} is .96 and S_{23} is .90. These are very stable conceptualizations, which to us reflect the quickly ascertained and unchanging nature of images. In contrast, issue stabilities start much lower but increase substantially over time which may indicate a learning of candidate positions over a longer period of time, as we expected. In this context, the fact that Ford's issue indices are initially more stable than Carter's (.79 versus .57), and remain so (.95 versus .64), may reflect Ford's incumbency in the sense that his issue stands had more time to be learned.

In addition to the Image and Issue indices, we need to mention two more variables used in our multivariate procedures. These are Party Lean and Vote Intention. We felt it important to include these variables in our path models of the decisional process, because each could be seen as a precommitment and thus have an influence on the process under investigation. Since we did not pull out those individuals who leaned towards one party or another, we included the variable at T_1 in our analyses. Similarly, with Vote Intention, as we did not exclude those individuals with vote intents, we included the variable in our analyses at T_1 and T_2 since we felt it could be influential in determining candidate preference.

Before going to our causal analysis, we present in Table 4

the Pearson product moment correlations for all the variables used in our path models.

Initially, it is apparent from observing the first two triangularly marked areas, that the Image indices for both candidates are highly correlated across the three time intervals. The lower two triangles delimit Issue index correlations across the time points, and those also are strongly correlated. The fact that Ford's issues are more highly correlated may again point to the fact that the Nixon-Ford issue positions had a number of years to be learned. Observing the two boxed areas, it is apparent that each candidate's Image indices are also strongly correlated with that candidate's Issue indices. Also, the bond between image evaluations and issue position learning strengthens over time, indicating possibly a learning process under way. It is not surprising that there is no significant correlation between Ford and Carter Image indices, indicating perhaps the ease of distinguishing between the twocandidates on the basis of image evaluations. On the other hand, the initial existence of strong correlations of .32 between T_1 Carter and Ford Issue indices and the disappearance of that correlation by T_3 to a mere .02 (see the arrow), possibly attests to the difficulty inherent in issue understanding and to the temporal process of learning to distinguish. There is also evidence of Vote Intention being correlated with some Image indices at T_1 and T_2, as well as with Ford Issue indices. Party Lean does not exhibit strong correlations with anything but Vote Intention.

To us, these results are intuitively reasonable and they encourage our multivariate tests to uncover a process as we propose. Since Table 4 does not, of course, present information on a temporally ordered process of image evaluation and consequent issue learning, we will now examine these relationships in a multivariate context.

CAUSAL ANALYSIS

Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 present the same path models but separately for each candidate. We have kept our path models as minimally encumbered with other variables as possible. Since we are interested on the effect of images on issues and vice-versa in an uncommitted sample, we have included as exogenous variables in different models in addition to Image and Issue indices, only those variables possibly influencing the uncommitted nature of our sample. Though variables such as Age and Socio-economic status may have some influence, we did not expect strong effects, and to keep our models simple, we did not include them. We admit that Debate Viewing may be an important variable, but as we did not have too large a sample, and as most people do view some of the debates especially if uncommitted (Chaffee and Choe, 1980), we felt safe for now in omitting it.

The path figures are arranged such that for either candidate, each model on the top is a mirror image of the model on the bottom except for Image to Issue changes. Moreover, figures 1 and 3 are the ones most closely following our propositions, while figures 2 and 4 examine a slightly different variation. Also for both candidates, the models on the top concord to our expectations, while the models on the bottom are their theoretical reverses. We examined Ford and Carter paths separately because we felt that there may exist differences between the two candidates that we might lose by

combining our eight paths into four.

In the time ordered sequence presented in our models, what is of interest to us is whether or not T_1 images predict T_2 issues as theorized. To that end, our recursive path models present the three time intervals the dataset includes before the actual vote. At the first stage, we assume are those variables that can influence later learning. Image index at T_1 and Issue index at T_1 are the logical choices here, but in addition we include Party Lean since it can lead to a precommitment of party or candidate and may strongly influence later learning. Looking at the models on the top, it is also possible, that Vote Intent can play a role similar to that of Party Lean in influencing later learning. On figures 2A and 4A, therefore, we substitute T_1 Vote Intention for T_1 Image first and T_1 Issue next (on figures 2B and 4B).

Next in this causal ordering, we assume for figures 1 and 3 that Vote Intention at T_2 may play an important role either as an indirect path through T_1 Image or T_1 Party Lean. It may be that once a favorite impression is made based on image evaluation, a decision on who to vote for is made which would lead to later issue learning. It is thus reasonable to include Vote Intention as an intervening variable. For figures 2 and 4, the second stage expects the I_2 Image index as the possible intervening variable. If Vote Intention does act as a sort of precommitment, it should then influence later image and issue learning.

At T_3, the final stage in the causal order, we theorized

issue learning to take place, having followed image learning and so the I_x issue index is here. The models on the bottom,being the theoretical opposites to our expectations therefore have the I_x Image index in place of the Issue one. Here, the expectation is for issue learning to lead to image preference.

What we expect from these models is that the path from the I_x Image index to the I_x Issue index for figures 1 and 3 will be the strongest, stronger than the direct path from the I_x Issue index. It should be noted again that figures 1 and 3 are what we proposed and their reverse. Figures 2 and 4 posit Vote Intention as possibly having an influence on the process and that variable is thus at I_x. However, since we expect image impressions to lead to issue learning, we still believe for figures 2a and 4a that the path from the I_x Image index will be the strongest. Here also, 2b and 4b represent the reverse expectation.

We do not address explicitly in our models the final vote. Our interest, however, is not so much to decompose the determinants of the vote as it is to understand the process through which learning and decisions take place. Our basic proposition is still that initial image impressions lead to later issue position learning or preferred candidate.

RESULTS

To estimate the coefficients of our path models, we used

the usual kinds of structural equations and series of multiple linear regression computations. We report in our models the standardized path coefficients as there was no difference between standardized and non-standardized ones.

Examining the four figures, it is apparent that Ford's and Carter's image evaluations and issue positions had different influences on one another. Looking at figures 3 and 4, Carter, first it seems that our propositions have met with relative success. In the model closest to our hypothesis, figure 3A, I_t Image predicts I_{t+1} Issue more powerfully (.37) than I_t Issue does (.19). Moreover, Vote Intention seems to play no significant role in issue learning (.00), nor does Party Leaning. Figure 3B, the reverse of our proposal, does not contradict us. I_t Image predicts I_{t+1} Image (.73) much better than I_t Issue does (.13). These results support a time ordered sequence of decisional events as we proposed. Initial image evaluations seem to predict later issue learning.

The pair in figure 4 tell a similar story. The possibility of Vote Intention influencing I_{t+1} Issue is not supported (.13 to I_{t+1} Image, .16 to I_{t+1} Issue). I_{t+1} Image is still the best predictor of I_{t+1} Issue (.36), again better than I_t Issue is (.22). In the opposite model, I_{t+1} Issue does not predict I_{t+1} Image (.15) better than I_t Image (.72) and so the model does not contradict our expectations.

Although Carter supported our propositions, Ford on the other hand, does not seem to. It is apparent from figures 1 and 2 that none of what we expected holds true for Ford. In

figure 1A, T_1 Issue predicts T_4 Issue (.51) much better than T_1 Image does (.19), unsupportive of our hypothesis. Things are not totally reversed tough, as figure 1B, the more direct challenge to our proposal, does not contradict. T_1 Issue still does not predict T_4 Image (.30) better than T_1 Image does (.59), although the path coefficient is as significant ($p<.01$). Similarly for the pair in figure 2, T_1 Issue predicts T_4 Issue (.51) much better than T_2 Image which is not even significant (.15). It is interesting to note here, that even though Party Leaning has no effect on T_2 Image (.02), T_1 Vote Intention predicts T_4 Issue well (.27), and as significantly as T_1 Issue does ($p<.01$). In model 2B, again, all is not lost as T_1 Image predicts T_4 Image (.35) better than anything else. Of note here is the strongly significant path coefficient of T_1 Vote Intention on T_2 Issue (.25), and the subsequent similarly significant path coefficient from T_2 Issue to T_4 Image (.30), although T_1 Vote Intention has no effect (.03) on T_4 Image.

In general we have found partial support for the hypotheses that directed our research design. It seems that for Carter, images at an initial time period do tend to determine later candidate preference and issue learning. For Carter, then, Image evaluations come at the beginning of a temporal sequence of decision making during elections. For Ford, however, we found no support for our proposals. Images here do not predict later issue learning and candidate preference, but initial issues do. Moreover, initial issues even do well in predicting

later image evaluations. Also for Ford, Vote Intention plays a significant role in later issue learning. For neither candidate, however, does Party Leaning play an important role.

It is not easy to interpret our results. Our expectations were met for one candidate but not for the other. As a result, we have some justification in not abandoning our initial propositions, although this forces us into post-hoc theorizing. It thus seems that incumbency had an effect on issue learning. We should quickly add that we still maintain issue understanding to be relatively impossible for most national election issues, but that candidate issue position learning does occur. With that in mind, it is probable that an incumbent's issue positions have had greater time to be learned, and as such should not be compared to a candidate who is newly voicing his position. What is the difficulty here, is the real T_1 for each candidate when both do not start at the same theoretical time. Also in the same vein, we may need to take into account in the future those who are habitual voters and have developed certain voting strategies, and those voting for the first time. Here again, T_1's do not correspond necessarily.

In the 1976 elections, Carter was a new candidate and since we looked at the uncommitted voters, most T_1's should be theoretically at the same point. Ford however, having continued most Nixon issue policies, had a large issue knowledge advantage. An argument here may be made that Ford's image was not well defined in 1976, but his issues, having

also been Nixon's for a long time previously, were well known. In this post-hoc analysis, it is not surprising that for Ford, images do not predict issues.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we have been interested in testing a proposition concerning the way in which voters determine their choice candidate. Starting from the idea that issues are too complex to be understood, we predicted that where there are no precommitments to influence the vote decision based on pre-campaign determinations, the voter would have no option but to resort to easily gathered image evaluation as a guide to candidate preference.

To test our basic proposal, we used secondary data analysis to examine results of our hypothesis in the context of the 1976 national elections.

We did find our propositions suppported in the case of Carter, but denied in the case of Ford. Beside explanations for why this might be as elaborated on above, there are other problems that need to be addressed which may have played an important role in our results. These have much to do with the fact that the design for our study was a secondary analysis.

Whereas our propositions necessitate a T_1 that truly is at the beginning of a campaign for all purposes, the T_1 of our data were before the first debates. If there is an opportunity to retest our hypotheses, we would like to establish a T_1

which is early enough that we can be confident of little learning before it. In this vein, four issue items are not enough to create a good index, a problem Chaffee and Choe also encountered.

More specifically then, 1988 might be a better test of our propositions. Even if he were the Republican candidate, Vice President Bush has not really made his position on many issues very clear, and it is as yet completely unknown who the Democratic candidate will be. As such a T_1 might be relatively equal in familiarity advantage to both candidates. Moreover, if T_1 is during the primaries or earlier, then issue commitment ("one-issue voters") can be seen more readily. Questions could also be asked to determine people's understanding of "hard," or national issues with a possible measure of "determination" or "finality" of understanding or decision, on issues over time. Open-ended questions probing the extent of consequences understood might be used, and questions dealing with certainty of individual decisions, criteria for decisions, and importance of decisions could be asked.

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TABLE 1: Image and Issue Items by Time

	Mean Score, by Wave			Standard Deviation		
	T_1	T_2	T_3	T_1	T_2	T_3
IMAGE ITEMS						
Honesty: Ford	3.44	3.43	3.38	1.06	0.95	0.98
Honesty: Carter	3.48	3.51	3.59	0.96	1.06	0.99
Strength: F	3.29	3.38	3.46	0.90	0.79	0.90
Strength: C	3.07	3.19	3.18	1.01	0.99	1.02
Friendly: F	3.68	3.61	3.53	1.07	0.94	0.93
Friendly: C	4.16	4.13	4.06	0.99	0.87	1.02
Leadership: F	3.29	3.28	3.39	0.97	0.98	0.99
Leadership: C	3.38	3.34	3.30	0.92	0.91	0.99
Clarity: F	3.24	3.42	3.39	0.90	0.87	0.83
Clarity: C	2.95	3.07	3.05	1.13	1.06	1.14
Speaking: F	3.22	3.37	3.35	0.96	0.88	0.81
Speaking: C	3.56	3.42	3.40	1.06	1.05	1.05
ISSUE ITEMS						
Taxes: Self	4.27	4.15	4.22	1.06	0.92	0.97
Taxes: Ford	2.80	2.63	2.93	1.01	1.01	1.11
Taxes: Carter	3.70	3.82	3.90	0.87	0.90	0.90
Unemployment: S	3.56	3.40	3.54	1.17	1.08	1.05
Unemployment: F	2.94	2.98	3.01	0.99	1.03	0.93
Unemployment: C	3.57	3.71	3.75	0.86	0.89	0.83
Abortion: S	2.82	2.97	2.88	1.45	1.40	1.42
Abortion: F	2.94	3.02	2.79	0.94	0.82	0.95
Abortion: C	3.00	3.20	3.08	1.01	0.84	0.93
Defense: S	3.14	3.06	3.02	1.13	1.14	1.14
Defense: F	2.52	2.47	2.49	0.96	0.93	0.88
Defense: C	3.09	2.90	3.15	0.91	0.77	0.97
Party Leaning	1.43	1.51	1.53	0.48	0.51	0.50
Vote Intent	1.40	1.42	1.51	0.49	0.52	0.51

Party Leaning is scored such that "1" is closer to Ford, and "2" is closer to Carter. Vote Intent is scored such that "1" is an intention to vote for Ford, while "2" is an intention to vote for Carter.

TABLE 2: Reliability Scores of Indices

	Cronbach's Alpha by Wave		
	T_1	T_2	T_3
IMAGE ITEMS			
Carter Image Index	.82	.88	.90
Ford Image Index	.79	.85	.89
ISSUE ITEMS			
Carter Issue Index	.35	.27	.53
Ford Issue Index	.55	.55	.68

Reliability coefficients were calculated differently for Images and Issues. For Image items, ratings for each candidate on the Image items were added separately at each time. For Issue items, net difference scores only were calculated. This was done by scoring each candidate's perceived position as a deviation from the respondent's own position at each time. The latter provides a measure of "relative distance," as it is usually referred to in the political science literature.

TABLE 3: Reliability and Stability Across Time

	Stability			Reliability
	S_{12}	S_{23}	S_{13}	
IMAGE ITEMS				
Carter Image Indices	.97	.93	.90	.84
Ford Image Indices	.96	.90	.86	.80
ISSUE ITEMS				
Carter Issue Indices	.97	.94	.37	.73
Ford Issue Indices	.79	.95	.75	.75

Note: Stability and reliability coefficients in this table reflect over time measures as defined by Heise (Heise, 1969).

TABLE 4: Pearson r's for Variables in Analysis

	Cole1	Cole2	Cole3	Fdle1	Fdle2	Fdle3	Coles1	Coles2	Coles3	Fdles1	Fdles2	Fdles3	Vote1	Vote2	Lean
College1	---	.82**	.76**	.11	.05	.01	.24**	.31**	.38**	.14	.12	.17*	.12	.05	.08
College2	---	---	.78**	.04	.00	.05	.21**	.38**	.38**	.15*	.20*	.20*	.15*	.18*	.12
College3	---	---	---	.13	.06	.08	.31**	.37**	.49**	.06	.06	.17*	.04	.04	.13
FdlEqu1	---	---	---	.77**	.69**	.29	.10	.20	.27**	.60**	.36**	.18*	.29**	.12	
FdlEqu2	---	---	---	---	.72**	.08	.00	.07	.33**	.45**	.34**	.11	.17*	.00	
FdlEqu3	---	---	---	---	---	.20*	.16*	.24	.47**	.34**	.50**	.19*	.23**	.01	
ColEqu1	---	---	---	---	---	---	.42**	.27**	.32**	.29**	.08	.14	.12	.07	
ColEqu2	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	.47**	.18*	.26**	.08	.08	.07	.01	
ColEqu3	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	.02	.11	.02	.08	.04	.06	
FdlEqu1	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	.59**	.34**	.02	.04	.00	
FdlEqu2	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	.71**	.26**	.16*	.07	
FdlEqu3	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	.33**	.21**	.08	
Vote1	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	.69**	.16*	
Vote2	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	.22**	
Lean	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	

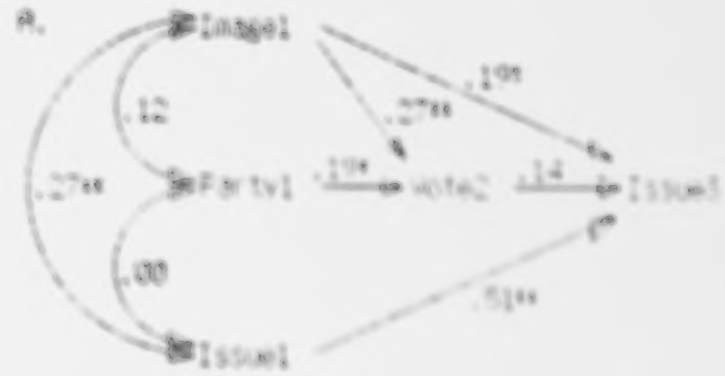
* : significant p<.05

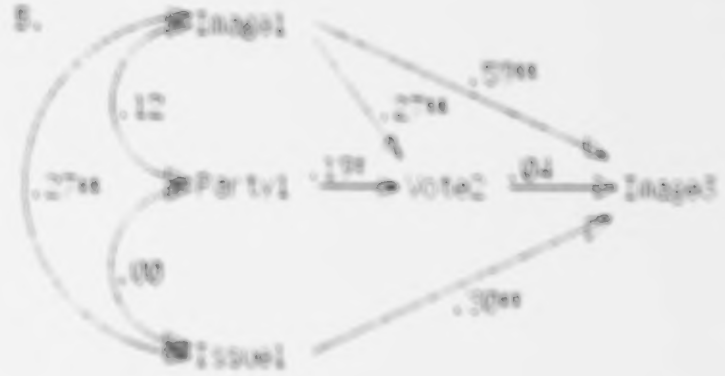
** : significant p<.01

NOTE: In order to simplify interpretation of differences in coding, and as no negative relationships were significant, signs have been omitted and only the magnitude of the correlation is considered.

(n=123)

FIGURE 1: Ford Path Analyses





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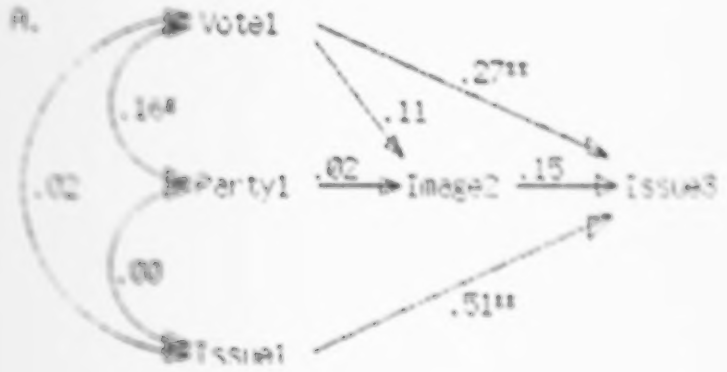
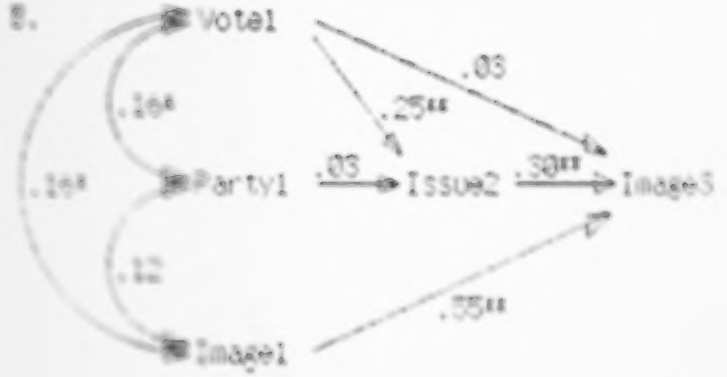
* : significant p<.05
** : significant p<.01
NOTE: In order to examine interpretation of differences in means, and as no negative relationships were significant, signs have been omitted and only the magnitude of the correlation is considered. Path coefficients are standardized Betas.
(n=123)

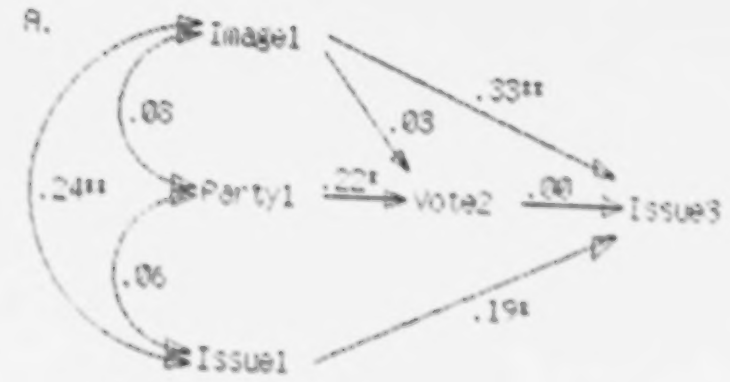
FIGURE 2: Ford Path Analyses

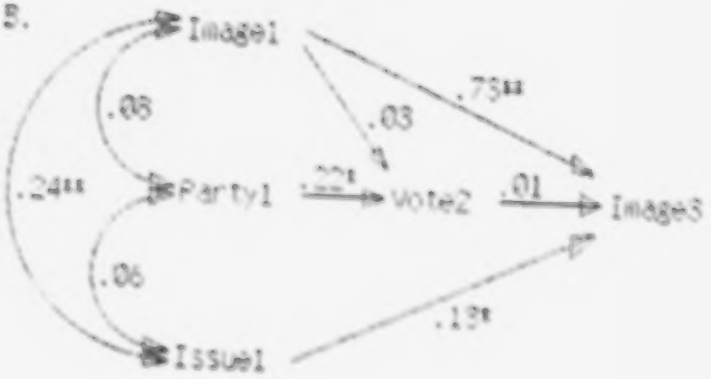




* : significant p<.05
** : significant p<.01
NOTE: In order to simplify interpretation of differences in coding, and as no negative relationships were significant, signs have been omitted and only the magnitude of the correlation is considered. Path coefficients are standardized Betas.
(n=423)

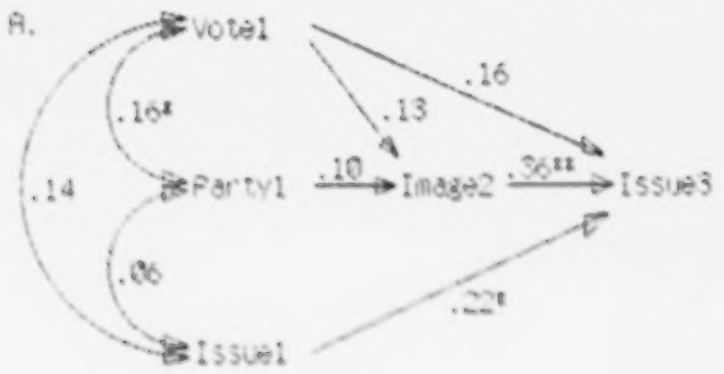
FIGURE 3: Carter Path Analyses

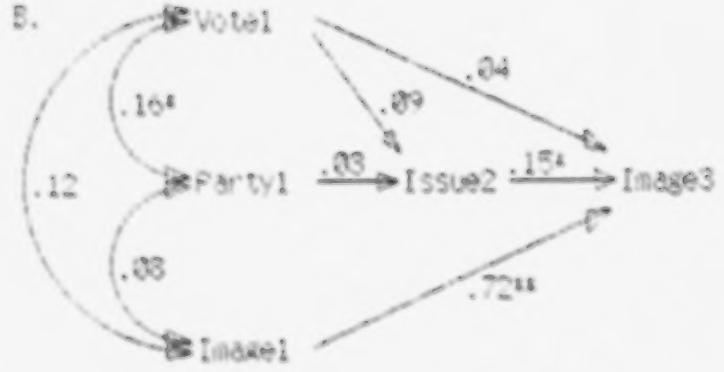




* : significant p<.05
** : significant p<.01
NOTE: In order to simplify interpretation of differences in coding, and as no negative relationships were significant, signs have been omitted and only the magnitude of the correlation is considered. Path coefficients are standardized betas.
(n=123)

FIGURE 4: Carter Path Analyses





* : significant p<.05
** : significant p<.01
NOTE: In order to simplify interpretation of differences in coding, and as no negative relationships were significant, signs have been omitted and only the magnitude of the correlation is considered. Path coefficients are standardized Betas.
(n=123)